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AUTHOR Rozema, Hazel J.
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ABSTRACT

A course in the honors program (a sophomore level social science seminar) at Millikin University offers an interdisciplinary approach to communication and sexuality, functions as a course in the Gender Studies Minor curriculum, and provides a needed source of sex education for the campus. The purpose of the course is to facilitate communication about sexuality with partners, friends, and future children. Human sexuality is a multi-dimensional topic that can be studied through the lens of biology, psychology, sociology, morality and ethics, anthropology, and communication. Topics discussed in the course include sexual research, anatomy and physiology, communication about sexual issues, and a variety of other topics such as date rape, teenage pregnancy, incest, religion and sexuality, abortion, prostitution, and sexual harassment. The course includes a unit on debate, argumentation and refutation, in which students engage in debates over current sexual topics. Two required analysis papers help students to explore, and then re-examine at the end of the course, their own sexual values and attitudes. (SR)

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COMMUNICATING ABOUT SEXUALITY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY

UNDERGRADUATE HONORS SEMINAR

by: Hazel J. Rozema, Ph.D.
Associate Prof. & Chair
Communication Department
Millikin University
Decatur, Il. 62522

Office: (217) 428-2833
Home: (217) 424-6225

E-mail: hrozema@mail.millikin.edu

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COMMUNICATING ABOUT SEXUALITY: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY UNDERGRADUATE HONORS SEMINAR

ABSTRACT: This paper describes a course titled "Communicating about Sexuality." The purpose of the course is to facilitate open communication about sexual issues with one's partner, friends, and children. The course serves as a model for examining issues from multiple perspectives. Human sexuality is a multi-dimensional topic that can be studied through the lens of biology, psychology, sociology, morality and ethics, anthropology, or communication. Developing the motivation for lifelong learning is often cited as a goal of undergraduate education. This sexuality course is but one step in a personal life-long learning process for students as their sexual thoughts and behaviors evolve and change.

The "Communicating about Sexuality" course works well in our small college because it serves multiple programs: 1) It is an integral part of our university-wide gender studies minor. 2) It fills a critical need for sex education courses on our campus. 3) It is one of several social science seminar choices for sophomores in our scholars program. 4) Honors students are exempt from the basic communication course. Thus this is their opportunity to be exposed to interpersonal communication theories. 5) Finally, the course includes a unit on argumentation, debate, and refutation. Students will improve their oral communication skills by engaging in two person debates over current sexual topics. As higher education focuses more on interdisciplinary courses, this class models the integration of argumentation theory, interpersonal theory, and the study of human sexuality.

Communicating about Sexuality: An Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Honors Seminar

At Millikin University, we have a four year honors program with its own distinctive courses. One of the requirements of this honors program is a sophomore level social science seminar. Social science seminars are encouraged to take an interdisciplinary approach to their topics. This paper describes one course that does double duty; it meets the needs of the honors program creating an interdisciplinary approach to communication and sexuality, while also providing a course in our Gender Studies Minor Curriculum.

The course offered at Millikin University titled "Communicating about Sexuality" could also be a model for courses that ask students to examine issues from multiple perspectives. Critics of higher education often bemoan the lack of integration of knowledge and concepts. Students take a number of separate courses in different disciplines, but rarely focus on connected learning. In the twenty-first century, students will need the ability to apply concepts from one situation to another and relate theories from one discipline to issues in their personal and public lives (Gaff, 1991). There is also a renewed emphasis on preparing students to deal with moral and ethical decision-making. Finally, colleges seek to create graduates who

will have a life-long passion for learning, recognizing they will have to continually upgrade their knowledge and skills in a rapidly changing world (Association of American Colleges, 1988).

The study of human sexuality is not limited to one discipline. Rather, it is a multi-dimensional topic that can be studied from the perspectives of biology, psychology, sociology, morality and ethics, anthropology or communication (Masters et al., 1992). Moreover, it is a field that often gets little attention in the mainstream curricula; rather sexuality is left to the Office of Student Development to develop programs for the residence halls. It is a curious fact that sexuality, a subject that powerfully affects our lives receives little attention in higher education. Sexuality is such a taboo topic that 75% of all teens learn about sex from books or peers, not from their parents (a statistic that hasn't changed since 1938). The number one problem reported in troubled marriages is not sex, but communication (Masters et al, 1992). Thus, sexual facts need to be placed in a context of interpersonal communication skills which enable individuals to discuss, debate, and formulate answers to sexual quandaries.

The purpose of the course "Communicating about Sexuality" is to facilitate communication about sexuality with one's partner, friends, and future children. The goal is for students to listen carefully and nonjudgmentally to opposing viewpoints on heated

topics such as: abortion, homosexuality, premarital and extramarital sex, date rape, contraception, sex education, abortion, pornography, and AIDS. "Becoming well informed about sex can also help us to deal more effectively with certain types of problems if they occur in our lives (e.g. infertility, sexual dysfunctions, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual harassment) ....In short, learning about sexuality is an invaluable preparation for living." (Masters, et al. 1992, p. 2). Surely there will be new sexual issues to confront in the twenty-first century. This course is but one step in a personal life-long learning process as our sexual thinking and behaviors evolve and change.

MULTIPLE ROLES FOR ONE COURSE

While the "Communicating about Sexuality" course originally began as a sophomore level social science seminar in our scholars or honors program, it now fulfills several functions. It has become an integral part of our university-wide gender studies minor. This is a relative new interdisciplinary 21 credit minor that includes courses such as: Women and the Law, History of Women in the U.S., Gender Communication, The Family, and Major Women Writers. Finally, it fills a need for sex education on our campus. Other than a course in physical education that deals with health topics such as AIDS and STDs, there is no course on our campus that directly addresses sex education. There is a need to address sexual issues on our campus because, as on all

campuses, our students have encountered date rape, STDs, premarital pregnancies, debates over the availability of condoms, homosexuals, and abortion. Moreover, it provides instruction in communication theories for students in our scholars program. These students are exempt from the basic "Fundamentals of Communication" course which is part of our general education program. Thus, they have not been exposed to interpersonal theories on relationships, listening skills, or conflict resolution prior to this course. The course also includes several weeks of instruction on argumentation, debate, and refutation. Our faculty is in agreement that more emphasis should be placed on teaching students critical thinking and argumentation skills. This is one means of achieving that goal by integrating argumentation theory into existing courses. The students in the sexuality course are required to pair up and engage in a two-person debate on a current sexual issue.

HOW THE COURSE UNFOLDS

There are three required textbooks for the course, plus an additional packet of readings placed on reserve in the library. The primary text is Sexuality: Insights and Issues by J. Greenberg, C. Bruess, and K. Mullen. This is supplemented by a book of readings titled Annual Editions: Human Sexuality 94-95 edited by O. Pocs. Finally, students are required to read Prized Possessions by Avery Corman, a novel about date rape on a small private college campus. The course begins with a look at

the multiplicity of approaches taken to the study of human sexuality, the difficulties of engaging in sexual research, and a brief overview of sexual research findings in the twentieth century (e.g. Kinsey, Masters and Johnson, and Zelnik and Kantner). Ice breaking exercises involve getting the class comfortable discussing sexuality and anatomy. One useful exercise asks students in small groups to prepare a list of synonyms for "sexual intercourse." The instructor compiles a master list on the blackboard or on an overhead. Then the class groups the terms according to common themes such as: forceful aggressive sex, religious terms, clinical terms, euphemisms, sports terms, and positive, egalitarian encounters. The class can then discuss how American culture has many conflicting views about sexuality. The video And the Band Played On is an excellent tool illustrating the difficulties of doing sexual research as well as how politics, greed, and public relations play major roles in corporate and governmental decisions and policies such as the delay in testing blood supplies for the HIV virus.

The second week of the course is spent on anatomy and physiology, understanding the male and female reproductive systems, and the four phases of sexual arousal and response. This includes an exercise where students examine their own psychosexual development, from playing doctor, to family attitudes toward nudity, through puberty and dating. Again students share memories in small groups, establishing the norm

that is it acceptable to talk openly about sex. This week also includes a lecture/discussion on facts and fallacies about masturbation and sexual fantasies.

The third week of the course focuses specifically on sex talk and how to communicate about sexual issues. After a discussion of cultural barriers to talking about sex, suggestions are given for ways to communicate more openly with your friends, partners, and children about sex. Throughout the course, interpersonal communication theories are included such as: confirming vs. disconfirming responses, techniques of active listening, Gibb's categories of supportive and defensive behaviors, distinguishing between facts and inferences, conflict styles and suggestions for conflict management, Knapp's 10 stages in relationships, communication as a punctuation of sequences, content and relational levels of messages, and recognizing defense mechanisms. Thus the course takes communication theories and contextualizes them by applying them to sex talk situations.

Subsequent weeks focus on the following topics: birth control, teenage pregnancy, date rape, incest, childbirth and midwifery, infertility and miscarriage, homosexuality, sexually transmitted diseases (including AIDS), religion and sexuality, sex education, abortion, pornography, prostitution, and sexual harassment.

INTEGRATING ARGUMENTATION & DEBATE INTO THE COURSE

Since this course is a seminar course in our honors or

scholars program, enrollment is generally limited to 18 students. Having a small class allows the instructor to pair students up for a 24 minute academic debate. Each pair chooses a topic, researches the topic, formulates a proposition, and chooses a side. Each student gives an 8 minute constructive speech and a 4 minute rebuttal in the following order:

Affirmative	8 minutes
Negative	8 minutes
Aff. Rebuttal	4 minutes
Neg. Rebuttal	4 minutes

The class spends about a week discussing argumentation theories, case building, refutation, and views a videotape of a sample debate. Sample debate propositions include the following:

Prostitution should be legalized in the United States.

Homosexual marriages should be legalized in the United States.

Criminal sex offenders should be chemically castrated.

Welfare mothers should be required to use norplant.

Surrogate motherhood should be outlawed in the United States.

Since the class size is small, there is sufficient time to engage in nine debates of approximately 30 minutes each. Students are taught how to keep a flow chart and all the class members are asked to flow each debate. Finally, students are graded on their oral debate performance and on a typed detailed legal brief containing their key arguments and supported by research. Most students have little training in formal debate practices and exhibit anxiety about this assignment. However,

they find the actual debates fun and educational. After flowing several debates, students find their critical thinking skills have significantly improved. The balanced presentation of evidence on both the affirmative and negative sides indicates the complexity of sexual issues and teaches students to be more cautious in forming their opinions.

ANALYSIS PAPERS

Two additional papers are required in the course. One is called a "Values Paper." This paper is written at the beginning of the semester exploring the student's personal sexual values (about premarital sex, abortion, homosexuality, date rape, pornography, etc.). Students are also asked to interview an individual over the age of 60 about their sexual values. In the later part of the paper, they compare and contrast their values with the values of their older interviewee. A second version of their "Values Paper" is written during the last week of the course. Now, students re-read the paper they wrote during the first week of classes, re-examine their values and attitudes and discuss how any of their attitudes have changed or been reinforced. In my experience, students most often change their attitudes toward homosexuality. Many students enter the course saying they do not know anyone personally who is gay. During the course, a panel of gay and lesbians from the campus and community come to the class and answer any questions posed to them. This particular class period gets the most positive response.

Students have even commented, "I'm glad you didn't tell me a panel of gays and lesbians were visiting class today, because then I wouldn't have come. And listening to them has really changed my images and attitudes toward homosexuals." Personal interaction can do more to eliminate stereotypes than reading an entire textbook. As one student wrote,

> In theory, I have always known that groups can't be stereotyped, but I have to admit that even though I knew this, I didn't really feel this way. The panel made me experience the reality of the words I had always known: people are individuals no matter what labels define their way of life....Eric (a panel member), talked about going to the theatre to watch Threesome. In the movie, there was an act of homosexuality. He said that it really hurt him to be sitting in a room full of people screaming and condemning homosexuals. I remembered that I had been one of those people in another theatre making those comments. It really hit home that I had acted extremely ignorantly. I have claimed to be educated on the subject of homosexuality, but I hadn't acted that way. Knowing facts and acting responsibly and respectfully, are two different things. I believe that more of our classes at college should make us "feel" the facts rather than simply learn them. (unpublished student paper, Fall, 1994).

This quote illustrates one of my goals for the course, which is to encourage students to be more open-minded. Some students may still not find homosexuality an acceptable alternative lifestyle, but I would hope that at the conclusion of the course, they would no longer engage in gay-bashing behavior or harassment of gays.

The second analysis paper relates to Prized Possessions, a novel about a campus date rape. Students identify with the novel because it describes a private college similar to Millikin University. A freshman is date raped by a senior during her first week on campus. When she finally admits she was date raped, the administration tries to cover it up and suggests that she was at fault for underage drinking. Students are asked to analyze the communication patterns, values, and decision-making styles of the main characters in Prized Possessions. Analyze how childhood conditioning, cultural values, and campus norms contributed to the date rape. Finally, apply communication theories to your analysis of critical decision points and indicate what suggestions you would give to the characters to change the outcome of the novel.

ADDITIONAL COURSE RESOURCES

There are community speakers available who can act as resource persons for the class. Planned Parenthood is usually happy to provide speakers who can talk about teenage pregnancy, old and new forms of birth control and current research on sexually transmitted diseases. Local gay and lesbians groups

may be available to function as a panel and answer questions posed by the class. Finally, popular television shows may provide video excerpts that can be used to analyze communication about sexuality. I have used excerpts from LA LAW that dealt with date rape and excerpts from Picket Fences dealing with teenage sexuality.

CONCLUSION

Small colleges have to find ways to offer a variety of curriculum choices with a limited faculty. The "Communicating about Sexuality" course at Millikin is one example of a course that functions in the scholars program, in the Gender Studies Minor, and provides a needed source of sex education for the campus. It also serves as a prototype of an interdisciplinary course that integrates the social sciences, sex education, interpersonal communication, and argumentation and debate theory in one seminar. Finally, the topic of "communicating about sexuality" can be a unit within traditional communication courses such as gender communication and interpersonal communication. Specific topics such as sexual harassment are appropriate for organizational communication classes. Given the impact that sexual behavior has on college students and the deadly implications of unsafe sex, communicating about sexuality is a topic that OUGHT to be addressed in college classrooms.

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